

LET THE NATURE TAKE ITS COURSE

Positive Impacts
of Outdoor
Programmes on
Young People

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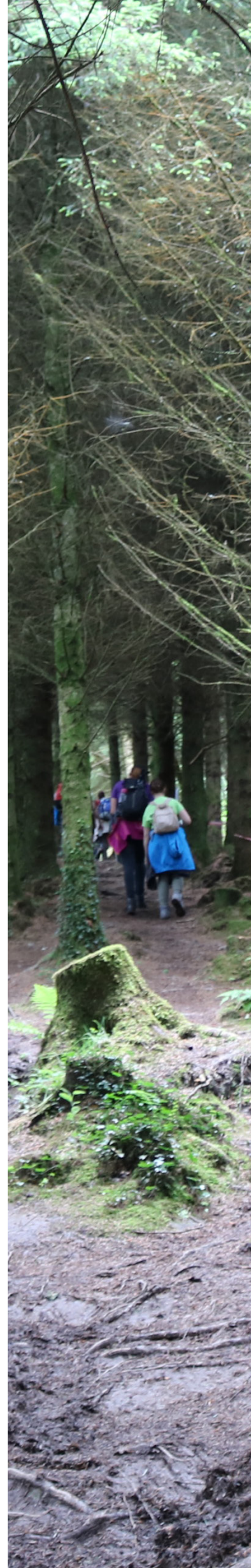
Images by Brian McManus, Clare Youth Service

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Why use Outdoor Programmes

Outdoor programmes have been shown to provide positive physical, social and developmental outcomes through experiences that create new stories, skills and self-concepts for young people. (Neill J,T; 2008). For children growing up in technology-enabled, safety-conscious and urbanised environments, programmes which take them into the natural environment and deliver experiential learning benefits are being seen internationally as more important than ever.

This document highlights some of the key benefits observed through programmes of this kind currently being conducted in Ireland and abroad.

Build Emotional Wellbeing

A Stanford University study (Hamilton. P, Hahn K; 2011) has shown that even as little as 90 minutes in a natural environment can increase feelings of emotional wellbeing. The same study also found that people with “reduced access to natural environments” may be more prone to mental illness.

Programmes which use the outdoors as the learning or therapeutic mechanism, can enable participants to achieve states of mindfulness, reflection and self-actualisation simply by being in a natural environment.

Un-plug the Young Brain

As technology continues to enable easy access to information, social media and on-demand entertainment, many people, and particularly young people, are increasingly disconnected from the natural environment.

The impact of social media on mental health and wellbeing is a topic of discussion in many forums (How healthy behaviour supports children’s wellbeing 2013), with virtual relationships and experiences recognised as contributors to increased feelings of isolation and disconnection from physical communities and environments. For adolescents, opportunities to build resources and capabilities to resolve issues in the ‘real world’ are crucial to their emotional development.

“Young people need to experience events which reveal their inner worth”.
Kurt Hahn, Founder of Outward Bound

Modern life requires us to constantly filter information, adapt and make decisions about what we engage with, often in an environment of competing sources of entertainment and stimulation. This results in the ‘command centre’ of our brain, the prefrontal cortex, to be constantly stimulated, which contributes to stress and anxiety (Hamilton. P, Hahn K; 2011). Being outside, using physical environments to challenge and stimulate, provides a natural antidote to this constant immediate stimulation.

Experience Real-life Challenges

Outdoor activities allow the developing brain to take some time out from the demands of modern lifestyle and immediate emotional stress (Hamilton. P, Hahn K; 2011). Well-designed programmes will engage participants with the natural environment, including a task or a challenge which provides safe risks. Activities such as hiking, climbing, canoeing or white water rafting provide a perfect forum to take risks, experience challenges and develop responses which promote resilience and emotional wellbeing.

Adventure as Therapy

“Mountain biking gives me the chance to forget about issues and just to be out doors and appreciate the simple things. The adrenaline rush is infectious and I always want more.”

Participant – Carlow Regional Youth Services, 2016

Outdoor programmes offer an alternative therapeutic approach to more traditional one-on-one counselling. For young people who are disengaged and anxious, the notion of sitting in a room and talking about their emotions with a relative stranger can be intimidating.

Many young people and specifically men, are reluctant to engage in help-seeking behaviour and are often coerced into support at a point of crisis. Programmes designed with a play or sport approach can facilitate a more natural connection between participant and the professional through a focus on the task rather than the individual.

Developing Problem Solving Skills

What outdoor programmes offer beyond typical weekend sports, is a chance to engage with different environments, mediums and unpredictable situations. Well facilitated programmes offer enough challenge and perceived risk that the participant is naturally absorbed in the problem solving and critical thinking.

Clare Youth Services identifies that long hiking programmes are an effective way of developing resilience in their participants. Walking up the mountain is the easy part. Its keeping yourself going when they are tired and the weather comes in that is the hard part. Our groups learn that success does not come easily but through determination and a desire to keep going.

Youth Worker, Shane

By combining the natural environment with an achievable yet significant challenge, the process of problem solving and achievement becomes the intervention. The participant will go through a heightened feeling of apprehension and perhaps fear through to realisation and success. For some it may be the first experience of success. This allows the facilitator to draw out the participants feeling and emotions and give feedback on how they are managing and coping with these complex feelings.

Building Resilience through Adversity

Resilience is the ability to adapt to life's challenges and manage oneself in a challenging or highly adverse situations. It is a crucial skill for anyone managing challenging home or personal circumstances.

“This is the worst thing I have ever done but the best thing I have ever done!”

Young man upon completing a 10-day rafting programme

Ireland has the fourth highest rate of youth suicide in the EU (Irish Times, 9th September 2016). One critical risk factor for a person with a prevalence of suicidal thinking is that person's capacity to resolve issues or be resilient.

Well-structured outdoor programmes have activities where the demands of the programme place enough stress amongst the group so that resilience is tested. Facilitators prepare participants in how to manage environmental challenges such as food, wind, rain, heat and cold. The skills of resilience are then seasoned in a real time during the programme. The participants apply the skills of problem solving, resourcefulness and critical thinking at the time when decisions made, (both good and bad), have immediate consequences.

Like many skills, resilience can be developed in young people, and outdoor programmes offer a unique opportunity to build this critical skill. The Psychological Society of Ireland stated that wellbeing and resilience can be promoted through “sport, exercise, healthy eating parental support and other forms of physical, emotional and mental development” (Irish Times, 9th September 2016).



Fishing Programmes at Clare Youth Service

Fishing programmes are used at Clare Youth Services as a way to help young people learn skills including resilience, problem solving, social co-operation and leadership. Fishing is an excellent example of a high impact, low risk outdoor programs suitable for young people with varying physical and mental abilities. Being remote will develop a sense of isolation, creating a need for stronger group connection. Having to set up camp and cook meals after a long day's activity helps develop resourcefulness. Reading the weather conditions and choosing the best fishing spot builds skills in decision making and critical thinking. Finally, managing the emotional demands of patience, expectation and disappointment builds emotional intelligence and self-regulation. A huge reward is the stories that the participants can share with others of their success through adversity after the program.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Outdoors

Isolation and disconnection leading to suicide is all too common for war veterans experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Outdoor programmes such as the Walking Wounded and Mates for Mates operating in Australia have been established as suicide intervention programmes for returned service men and women experiencing PTSD.

Research has shown that sufferers of PTSD who participate in outdoor programmes make better connections with others and health professionals while participating in their programmes (Dana Erickson 2011). This research also suggests that those who suffer from PTSD achieve better outcomes when their combined support involves outdoor programmes.

“...pairing some kind of nature-assisted therapy with counselling services could be beneficial especially when treating secondary symptoms of PTSD”

Annerstedt & Wahrborg 2011

Social Connections

Psychologist and adventure therapist Simon Crisp's 2005 review of adventure-based programmes concluded that one of the top three outcomes identified by their participants was the connections they made with others. Far from being an isolating experience, facilitated outdoor activities can develop stronger interpersonal relationships through the journey and the co-operative nature of the process. This is found particularly on longer journey programmes where the group are placed in an isolated environment, requiring them to develop relationships to achieve outcomes during the expedition.

“Stand up paddle boarding was a great way to get to know my peers”.

Participant – Carlow Regional Youth Services paddling programme

Case Study 1

Nathan was referred to Clare Youth Services due to some petty crime, poor school attendance and use of drugs and alcohol. Although not yet a candidate for diversionary programs he was considered to be a young man increasingly becoming disconnected from the community. The fishing program gave Nathan the opportunity to bond with youth workers which then gave him the space to work through his challenges. Nathan now has a young family of his own and continues to make contact with the service using the support to engage his young son in his passion for fishing.



Case Study 2

Disengagement to Contributing through fishing

William was referred to Clare Youth Services at the age of 13. At the time he was drinking, getting in to fights and was not attending school. His family life was considered to be stable and supportive but struggling financially. William was first engaged through the soccer program but took great interest in the fishing program when offered to him. William developed stronger friendships, new skills and confidence in his new hobby. William also earns an income from selling the fish he catches to his community, providing a sense of pride and contribution to his family.

Emotional Regulation

Socialisation is another key skill developed through adventure-based programmes, through the experience of managing challenging emotions as an individual within a group in real time. Skills such as empathy, communication, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence are tested during these programmes which demand team-work to reach goals.

Developing Confidence and Identity

The ideal adventure programme sets out a challenge and assists the individual to learn, acquire or actualise the skills they need in order to meet that challenge: but never to lead them to success. Journey programmes demonstrate how the road to success can be through failure, often showing parallels with a participants' own life experience.

“For some of these kids this will be one of the few times they are given the space to be children. Having the freedom to explore and play in a natural environment is often a new experience for some of our participants”.

Clare Youth Services leader, 2016

“Ask a person if they want to see the view on top of the mountain most of them will say yes but very few have the sheer will, determination and motivation to make it to the top”.

Group leader Shane

Experiential learning asks the participant to communicate and problem solve effectively within the group in order to meet a real challenge. The challenge is external, and de-personalised, as these programmes use the natural environment rather than setting up artificial or competitive constructs to motivate participants.

“It was like a lifetime of experiences compressed into two weeks. I used every sense, every skill, every limb, every milligram of energy in the shortest space of time possible.”

Participant, Outward Bound USA

Creating New Stories

Young people in the juvenile justice system often have a singular, negative story about themselves. These stories focus on the deeds they have done, the people they have hurt and often convey a sense of loss and confusion about who they are and their behaviour.

Adventure-based outdoor programmes offer the opportunity for a participant to add a new story, of a different kind hardship and adversity. The new narrative is one of overcoming challenge, managing fear and demonstrating endurance, culminating in adventure and ultimately triumph.

Outdoor adventure programmes give young people at risk an opportunity to be successful. Facilitated programmes offer the chance for the individual to move through adversity and conquer the challenge rather than be encumbered by it. In doing so, there is a new story to this person's narrative. A story where the young person demonstrated compassion towards another member of their group by carrying their backpack when their friend could not. Or when tired and wet, the group still needed to prepare their own meals. Then on the final day of reaching the summit through the foul weather they all made it to the top under their own steam and sheer willpower.

This new narrative created through adversity and challenge can be the foundation by which the participants start to reassess what they are capable of achieving, taking these new skills and self-concepts back into their school and home lives.

Skills from Outdoor Programmes can be Tailored to the Needs of Participants

Well-designed programmes will take into account the strengths and needs of the young person or group. Where stress or anxiety is an issue contrasting activities such as fishing and white water rafting could be used to relieve the stress and anxiety.

“While it obvious that bringing a young person with a fear of water rafting would increase their stress levels it took some experiential learning of our own to discover that sitting on a river bank for three hours is just as stressful for some of our more active young people. We are now more strategic when deciding on the activities in outdoor programmes.”

Clare Youth Service Manager, 2016

Examples of Types of Outdoor Programmes

- Calculated risk taking (e.g. canoeing, climbing)
- Undertaking a goal oriented journey (e.g. hiking, camping)
- Managing unpredictable circumstances (e.g. in white water rafting)
- Being outdoors (e.g. fishing)

Skills and Benefits that can be Delivered:

- Ability to transcend self-imposed limits, facing fears, creating new stories.
- Build fitness and strength, tenacity, emotional regulation, responsibility, resilience, experience of goal realisation.
- Self-reliance, resilience, teamwork, adaptability, collaboration.
- Mindfulness, patience, critical thinking, decision making, coping with disappointment.

The Importance of Reflection in Outdoor Work

On some occasions being outdoors is enough. The experience will leave its mark and the process of self-realisation of the benefits would only be lessened by assisted analysis. For the most part programs will have some degree of organised or guided reflection to aid learning.

“It is very powerful when a young person can identify that they have overcome a fear of heights, identify that they made their own decisions, logically and critically, and have refused to give up when completing a climbing pitch.”

Clare Youth Service worker, 2016

This process of self-realisation through reflection is also the first step to the transfer of learning from the outdoor experience to everyday life resulting in better decision making by the young person.

Developing more Effective Outdoor Work: An Irish Case Study

In 2015 Clare youth service was invited to be a partner in an Erasmus+ Project that would become the COURAGE Programme. Courage is a three year programme of research and development integrating educational, youth, sports and other leisure activities. The project consists of five partners from Ireland (Clare Youth Service), Denmark, Portugal, Lithuania and Norway. It addresses the exclusion of young people from social, educational, cultural and economic opportunities associated with full citizenship as a serious issue in Europe. The project will end autumn 2018.

This funding and support from partners allowed CYS to first examine its existing outdoor programme through a State of the Art or Baseline Study.

In CYS the outdoor programmes are seen as a tool for youth workers similar to any other including music, art, sports etc., where the outcomes may relate to personal development or any issue the young person may identify or need at that particular time. These may include – drug and alcohol issues, criminal or anti-social behaviour, team building or mental health.

The baseline study examined Programme Logic Models and evaluations of existing individual CYS Outdoor Programmes. This was done through desk research and interviews with individual youth workers and young peoples’ feedback.

Main Findings;

- In the main Outdoors Programmes have been successful with a positive response from the young people involved and most of the short and medium term outcomes realised.
- While there has been some crossover most programmes have been designed by individual workers and there is no common template for course design.
- Most programmes are not backed up by a strong theoretical base and where it is evident the theory to practice link is weak.
- There is a wide range of programme type with some more simply “activities” rather than non-formal education.
- There is no specific training programme for staff engaging in outdoor work.

Using the structures and resources of the COURAGE programme CYS has been able to build on the strengths of the existing programme and to make changes to improve the programme as identified by the Baseline Study.

Over the course of the case study Clare Youth Service has;

- Had three staff complete Lowland Mountain leader training.
- Introduced staff peer training programme specifically designed for those engaged in outdoor work – this has theoretical and practical components.
- Completed a brief review of youth-focused outdoor activity models and the evidenced outcomes from these models.
- Started to compile practical handbook for staff engaged in outdoor work to use the research based evidence and the action research evidence from existing CYS programmes.
- Introduced two new Outdoor Programmes in response to consultations with young people. One of these was in the Community Training Centre with learners on the QQI and LCA programmes. The other was with Participants on the T.A.C.T Ennis Garda Youth Diversion Project.



Following the changes implemented through 2016 and 2017 staff have reported that it is easier to plan and run outdoor activities, easier to recruit young people who would normally not engage and staff new to this area of work have said they are more confident in becoming involved following the peer training and the availability of new resources.

“I feel that I could contribute in a meaningful way as a second leader on a hike having the experience of today”

CTC Tutor following training day on the Twelve O’Clock Hills

The young people involved in the programmes have been very positive in their evaluations of the project indicating that they were fun, a good learning experience and easily accessible to them as the workers provided equipment such as boots, jackets and food. They also said it was easy to get involved as they knew the workers well and trusted them.

“8km walk on rough terrain. 10 mins late leaving – packing boots. I love the peace and quiet. Least favourite part was nothing.”

CTC Learner’s Log Book, 2017

Like any youth work or non-formal education programme the Clare Youth Service Outdoor Programme needed the input of additional time and resources to enable positive changes to improve the programme. But perhaps more than anything the COURAGE Project brought a structure and focus around which to drive and enable the changes.

Clare Youth Service is a partner of the Erasmus+ COURAGE programme
www.eucourage.eu



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